DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 586 EA 030 934

AUTHOR	Cowan, D'Ette; Capers, Melissa
TITLE	Co-Developers: Partners in a Study of Professional Learning Communities.
INSTITUTION	Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, TX.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	9p.; Theme issue. Published biannually.
CONTRACT	RJ96006801
AVAILABLE FROM	SEDL, 211 East 7th Street, Austin, TX 78701-3281. Tel: 800-476-6861, ext. 259; Tel: 800-476-6861, ext. 304 (TTY). For full text: http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues82/welcome.html.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT	Issues...about Change; v8 n2 2000
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Involvement; Cooperation; *Cooperative Learning; Educational Change; *Educational Principles; Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership; *Leadership Styles; *Participative Decision Making; *Professional Development; Professional Training; *School Community Relationship; School Support
IDENTIFIERS	*Learning Communities; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

ABSTRACT

Managing and leading educational change entails a great degree of complexity and uncertainty and remains a pressing challenge for administrators. This work documents lessons learned from a national study on the concept and development of the Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement project of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). A review of research by SEDL highlighted the educational benefits of professional learning communities (PLCs), and identified their five defining characteristics, including supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. To better understand how PLCs evolve, SEDL initiated a 3-year project, including creating a corps of educational professionals ("Co-Developers") willing and able to act as external change agents in schools. Providing resources and scheduling regular meetings, SEDL stimulated deep and ongoing dialogue regarding the essential elements of PLCs. Co-Developers organized a conference with teachers and principals from 20 schools to better promote understanding and cooperation and to overcome apprehension about change among school personnel. The Co-Developers provided valuable data to SEDL through a variety of instruments, including surveys, narratives, visual displays, and reports. While reliable measurements are elusive, SEDL believes the project helped disseminate valuable information about PLCs that will help schools make needed improvements in practice nationwide. (Contains 11 references.) (TEJ)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 452 586

Volume 8, Number 2

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

2000

EA

Issues . . . about Change

Co-Developers:

Partners in a Study Of Professional Learning Communities

Changing schools is highly challenging, complex and messy work. Although it is not unlike change undertaken in other types of organizations, some would propose that educational change entails more than the average amount of complexity and uncertainty.

How to manage, guide, and lead such change in schools has been an enduring question. During the eighties, the research clearly indicated that the role principals played was of great importance. However, in the nineties, an emerging literature began to report a more democratic and participatory approach, one that invited all professionals on the school staff into inclusive leadership focused on school change and improvement. School staffs operating in this way came to be known as professional learning communities (PLCs) (Hord, 1997).

The purpose of this *Issues* paper is to report one aspect of a national study focusing on the concept and development of Co-Developers in the Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement (CCCII) project at Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). The paper focuses on the concept, selection, role definition, preparation, support, and development of a group of Co-Developers that engaged with SEDL in the work of school improvement.

Through its 1997 review of the literature regarding PLCs (Hord, 1997), SEDL had come to understand the substantial benefits PLC schools provided for both teachers and students. In PLCs, staff experience reduced isolation (Lieberman, 1995; McLaughlin, 1993); increased commitment and vigor to the mission and goals of the school (Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1995; McLaughlin, 1993); greater commitment to change (Bryk, Easton, Kerbow, Rollow & Sebring, 1993); higher levels of trust (Kruse & Louis, 1995); and greater opportunities for professional development that connect individual needs with the school's collective mission.

Students in PLC schools had decreased dropout rates and fewer classes "skipped;" lower absenteeism rates; and greater academic gains in reading, math, science, and history than did students in traditional schools (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995). These researchers also found smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds in PLC schools.[1]

The literature review SEDL conducted also helped to identify the five defining characteristics, or dimensions, of a PLC: supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of that learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice (Hord, 1997). Through its research conducted from 1995-1998 on existing PLC schools, SEDL developed a deeper understanding of these five dimensions in action, as well as some insight into strategies for creating PLCs. While this

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh Street, Austin, Texas 78701 (512) 476-6861

EA 030934

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

research revealed much about the way the schools *existed* at the time of the studies, they did not impart rich descriptions of how they *came to be* PLCs. Only through studying schools *in the process* of developing a community of professional learners could the full, rich detail of such an endeavor be captured.

Therefore, SEDL designed a three-year project aimed at learning how schools develop as professional learning communities. The project's first challenge was determining how to meaningfully organize and staff such an effort. After reviewing laboratory resources, but more importantly, reviewing SEDL's previous experience in working with practitioners across the region's educational system, an innovative idea emerged. Why not invite colleagues from the *Leadership For Change Cadre*[2] to participate in fleshing out the design and implementation of a project that would increase understanding about creating PLCs while doing this work in local schools? Thus was born the idea of creating a corps of education professionals from this previous cadre, called *Co-Developers*, who were able and willing to enter schools as external agents of change.

The purpose of these Co-Developers would be to initiate and support school improvement efforts using strategies that developed an infrastructure for continuous improvement and inquiry, the very essence of a PLC. SEDL's role would be to support and nurture Co-Developers' capacities individually and as a community of learners to help them work effectively in their schools. The next section explains the concept of Co-Developers, reports how they were selected, and describes each of the four roles Co-Developers would play.

Conceptualizing the Co-Developer Roles

In the fall of 1997, SEDL invited selected colleagues from the Leadership for Change cadre within the region, and a few outside of the region known to have special interest in school improvement, to join the Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement (CCCII) project, known more informally as the PLC Project. Thirty individuals—practitioners and consultants from higher education faculties, state departments of education, intermediate education agencies, local education agencies, campuses, and another regional education laboratory—expressed an interest in participating in the project. Although knowledgeable in their own areas of expertise and experience, none of the participants was expected to enter the study with all the skills they would require as Co-Developers. Instead, they would partner with SEDL in a journey of discovery, on which they would be expected to act in four capacities:

1. *As colleagues in a professional learning community of Co-Developers.* SEDL recognized the importance of giving Co-Developer individuals firsthand, experiential learning about what it is like to be part of a PLC, so they might have a meaningful understanding of what PLC is and how it operates.

2. *As external facilitators and field-based developers in their schools.* Serving as an external change agent or facilitator is a very demanding role, requiring a wide array of capacities. This was the primary role to be played by Co-Developers if they were to help their schools operate as PLCs. Their preparation for this role was an imperative.

3. *As contributors to applied research.* Being able to maintain records of their actions in the schools, their plans, and subsequent reflections on the effects of executing their plans would provide the project with information about what worked and what didn't in creating PLCs, and under what circumstances. Preparing Co-Developers to produce and maintain records of their work was highly important in documenting their experiences at their school sites.

4. *As disseminators of information about the project to other audiences.* In order to "scale up"[3] the creation of PLCs and the sharing of procedural knowledge for doing so, Co-Developers would make presentations to conferences and publish in education journals so that this information would be widely available.

The following section describes the processes SEDL designed and implemented in order to prepare and support this diverse group of education professionals in each of these roles for the work they undertook in schools.

Colleagues in the Professional Learning Community of Co-Developers

The thirty Co-Developers first came to Austin in November 1997 for an overview of the three-year project and an introduction to the concept of the PLC. This initial meeting, in particular, tested the courage of participants' conviction, as they came to understand that they had volunteered for a journey for which no map existed. At these early meetings especially, but also throughout the project, SEDL provided research (both their own and that of others) that communicated the power of schools as communities of learners. SEDL also engaged Co-Developers in deep dialogue that led them to share and develop their vision of school improvement through PLC structures and relationships and to recognize the potential for increased student learning through such structures and relationships.

Through learning experiences and interactions such as these, Co-Developers gained both an intellectual understanding of the dimensions and benefits of PLCs, and an increasing personal experience in belonging to a PLC. Furthermore, all SEDL meetings and conferences with the group included varied opportunities for Co-Developers to interact with one another to help them develop strong professional relationships that would sustain them in their work ahead.

Subsequent meetings throughout the first six months of the project were designed primarily to prepare Co-Developers for their work in the field. At the second meeting of Co-Developers, in January 1998, SEDL asked Co-Developers to join with them in identifying the knowledge, skills and understandings (proficiencies) that would prepare them as external facilitators to help schools develop as PLCs. These proficiencies would be useful in carrying out their role as external facilitators and field-based developers in schools they selected for the project.

Because each Co-Developer came to the project with unique and valuable knowledge and skills in working with schools, the task of teaching the proficiencies so that all had needed skills was largely assumed and led by Co-Developers themselves. Such experiences in which Co-Developers looked to their colleagues as resources for their own growth and development further strengthened the sense of community within the group while simultaneously helping them to become more knowledgeable and proficient as external facilitators.

Four-day meetings in March and in May of 1998 provided opportunities for these "resident experts" to train themselves in various proficiencies identified as necessary in their work. Co-Developers with knowledge and skills about particular proficiencies shared their personal expertise with their colleagues as a means to increase the expertise of the whole group. Examples of these proficiencies were skills in data collection and analysis, dialogue, team building, overcoming resistance, and developing a vision.

Utilizing Co-Developers as "resident experts" in the various proficiencies modeled shared leadership, highlighted the

often hidden capacities of individuals in the group, and provided opportunities for collective learning on the part of all participants. In addition, with Co-Developers' input and advice at these early meetings, SEDL staff developed mechanisms and processes for compiling and reporting data that Co-Developers were to collect at their schools.

Throughout this period, SEDL provided the Co-Developers continuing opportunities to engage in deep and ongoing dialogue about the five characteristics of PLCs and their potential for school improvement. These conversations helped the Co-Developers develop a clearer and more unified vision of what a PLC would look like, what a staff in such a community would do, and how they would interact in such a setting.

This opportunity to dialogue also served to increase Co-Developers' commitment to the project and to deepen their appreciation and respect for one another. As Co-Developers came to know and trust one another through learning experiences, and, later, to relate their stories of success and struggle in their schools, they increasingly sought opportunities to share their personal practice with Co-Developer colleagues.

External Facilitators and Field-Based Developers in their Schools

At the earliest stages of the project, SEDL encouraged Co-Developers to begin considering a school with which they would work in developing a PLC. Co-Developers held discussions at the meetings about whether to select a school that seemed to be at a high level of readiness for such change, or to select a school that appeared to be at a low-readiness stage.[4]

It was finally decided to give Co-Developers the option of selecting the school they wanted to work with regardless of its apparent readiness. Allowing Co-Developers to make this decision based on individual and collective knowledge, reflection, assessment and intuition modeled the shared and supportive leadership that forms the foundation of PLCs. In SEDL's view, having schools representing a broad range of readiness would also offer knowledge about how PLCs are created along the full spectrum of readiness for change. Throughout this time, SEDL continued to give extensive attention to equipping Co-Developers with skills to prepare them for work at their target schools.

Also during this time, the ranks of Co-Developers were trimmed by the pressures of "real life" (new job assignments, illness, family circumstances). In the end, twenty-two Co-Developers entered twenty-two schools that varied not only in readiness for change, but also in regional location, ethnicity, and grade levels.

In September 1998, Co-Developers invited the principal and a teacher (hereinafter referred to as the "lead teacher") from their school to accompany them to a SEDL conference in Austin. This meeting introduced the concept of PLCs to campus-based individuals and engaged these professionals in the dialogue, discussion and shared responsibility for introducing—and practicing—PLC principles in their schools.

Co-Developers collaborated in planning this conference and took an active role in leading various parts of the meeting. The conference provided time for many of the Co-Developers to get acquainted with their principals and lead teachers and offered an opportunity for these Co-Developer/principal/lead teacher "trios" to plan how they would present the project to their school staffs when they returned to their campuses. The meeting also offered some tools, strategies and processes for getting started.

These experiences fed Co-Developers' intuition, understanding, and compassion as they worked with school personnel who were at times resistant, hostile and/or fearful of change and responsibility. The meeting also provided opportunities for

Co-Developers to reflect upon various ways to apply their new learning and expertise, and to make a concrete plan for how they would use each proficiency.

At the close of the September 1998 meeting, SEDL provided each participant with a large binder of strategies related to the proficiencies the Co-Developers had identified, designed, and shared as necessary to creating PLCs. Almost all of these strategies had been used in some manner with the Co-Developers (and some with the principals and lead teachers) in preparation for their work in schools.

Furthermore, at all meetings, SEDL modeled principles of professional development that research supports for adult learners. SEDL also provided opportunities for Co-Developers to reflect on use of specific strategies (e.g., dialogue) for different purposes. Although at this time only a prototype of a final product, this set of strategies provided useful tools and information for Co-Developers' work with their schools.

To further support Co-Developers in their work at schools, SEDL staff members from the Strategies for Increasing School Success (SISS) program were assigned to Co-Developers to offer assistance on issues that developed at schools. Each SEDL staff member worked with five to seven Co-Developers and served an important function in supporting Co-Developers by listening to their frustrations, acting as sounding boards for some of their ideas about their work in their schools, and suggesting new and innovative ideas.

Frequent email and telephone contacts made it possible for SEDL staff to respond quickly and efficiently to questions and concerns of Co-Developers. SEDL staff also identified journal articles, internet websites, laboratory personnel, and other resources to locate research-based approaches related to Co-Developers' issues as they worked with their schools.

Contributors to Applied Research

Co-Developers provided valuable data for SEDL's research through completing and administering a variety of instruments, and through sharing their stories in oral and written forms. At SEDL conferences, a number of methods—including narratives and visual displays, audiotape recordings of Co-Developer reports and focus group proceedings, and observations by SEDL staff—were utilized to capture data from Co-Developers, principals, and teachers. SEDL provided Co-Developers with archival data collection forms and other materials to guide them in recording important events in the development of their schools as PLCs.

As an aid to recording their continuing process, SEDL also developed and provided Co-Developers with a casebook organized to capture what they did at their schools and what happened as a result of their school improvement activities. The casebook was further designed to help Co-Developers report how their interventions and activities promoted one or more of the five dimensions of a PLC. Co-Developers were encouraged to include descriptions of critical incidents—planned or unplanned, successful or unsuccessful—which they recognized as particularly significant in their efforts to create a PLC.

In January 1999, after most of the Co-Developers had been in their schools for approximately five months, SEDL hosted a writing conference designed to capture the stories of their initial work in the schools in written form. Prior to the conference, SEDL requested that Co-Developers prepare a draft of their stories focused on the initial actions taken by the Co-Developers, principals, and school staff that contributed to one or more of the five dimensions of a PLC.

At the conference, SEDL organized Co-Developers into teams of five or six, and

provided guidance in how to structure and relate their stories to their colleagues. SEDL coached Co-Developers in the use of a dialogue protocol to solicit warm and cool feedback, provide encouragement, clarify events, and offer suggestions to colleagues on their stories. This interaction helped Co-Developers improve and revise their written drafts to include more clarity and detail and deepened the sense of shared overall effort to developing their schools as professional learning communities.

In addition, SEDL trained Co-Developers in the administration of other instruments, including the PLC assessment, *School as a Professional Learning Community Survey* (Hord, 1999). SEDL requested that all Co-Developers first administer the PLC assessment instrument to provide baseline data about how the school staff perceived itself along a continuum of each of the five dimensions of a PLC. This information profiled the campus at the initial stage of the project and further helped the Co-Developers learn about the school. Subsequent administrations of the PLC survey measured each school's progress, and Co-Developers shared these results with their school staffs. SEDL also designed training to prepare Co-Developers to use an interview protocol to collect perceptual data from school personnel on their progress in becoming professional learning communities.

Disseminators of Information about the Project to Other Audiences

Acknowledging the significance of PLCs in their own professional areas of interest and affiliation, SEDL helped to identify Co-Developers who held membership in similar organizations. SEDL then organized Co-Developers into groups to plan dissemination of information about the CCCII project.

Meeting time allocated for this purpose had positive results. For example, one Co-Developer asked SEDL staff to write an article for her state's professional development publication. Another Co-Developer, the editor of a national school development council publication, included articles from SEDL staff and colleague Co-Developers for an entire issue focused on PLCs. Other Co-Developers collaboratively developed and delivered presentations about professional learning communities and the CCCII project at a national staff development conference.

The most obvious example of Co-Developers serving as information disseminators comes from the activities of the self-formed "research group" of Co-Developers. Comprised primarily of university faculty who have a professional interest in being published, members of this group serve as mentors, editors, collaborators and friends to one another, in support of efforts to collect, code, analyze, write about, and publish articles about this project in professional journals and through professional conferences. At the Year 2000 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Co-Developers from the SEDL project presented six papers reporting learnings from the project. The intensity of effort required to write and deliver these papers further strengthened the commitment of the researchers to the project and understanding of how PLCs can support school improvement.

There is no way to measure the informal dissemination of the fruits of the project that occurs between school personnel and is accomplished through conversation and example. There is little doubt that conversations of principals and lead teachers in the CCCII project schools have impacted practice and interactions in ways that cannot be ascertained in this study. Similarly, conversations among principals or among district personnel involved in the project with their co-workers represent effective, valuable, and actual methods whereby this project is being explained and explored in educational circles across the nation.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the project, thirty individuals gathered to learn about PLCs, and committed themselves to attempting to create these structures in schools. Each of these individuals was an accomplished professional, with a commitment to school renewal measured in their willingness to engage in such a challenge. And yet each Co-Developer had much to learn—about PLCs, and about participating in action research.

The structure of the CCCII project and the schedule of conferences provided critical preparation for Co-Developers as they selected and engaged schools in the project. Conferences were designed to foster supportive professional relationships among Co-Developers so that they could experience on a firsthand basis the benefits of professional learning communities for their own professional development. Co-Developer conferences provided the necessary training to identify and prompt the "next steps" as the project moved forward.

Specifically, assigning SEDL staff to work closely with individual Co-Developers provided Co-Developers with accessible experts in negotiating the challenging role of change agents in schools. As education professionals committed to the project and yet one step removed from the struggles of any particular school, SEDL staff provided resources, perspective, sympathy and expertise as necessary. They also served as clearinghouses of strategies and stories, and were available during the long months between Co-Developer meetings to direct communication and collaboration among Co-Developers and to coordinate data collection activities.

In May 2000, SEDL hosted the "final" conference of the "trios" in the Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement project. This conference provided an opportunity for SEDL to collect more data about the progress of schools in the project, to gain feedback about the effectiveness of SEDL's support, and to challenge the principal and teacher from each school to continue the work they started.

The project SEDL envisioned in the mid-nineties is completed—yet, at all schools, the impact of the project undertaken with Co-Developers has barely begun. We have not been surprised by the scale of effort necessary to make change real and lasting; by the formidable challenges facing schools, from budget difficulties to student needs to continuous staff turnover; and by the wisdom, creativity and dedication of people involved in this educational endeavor.

The staff at SEDL have sought to provide Co-Developers as educational professionals with a conceptual framework which will serve them—and others—in creating significant positive change in the nation's schools. From Co-Developers and schools, we have learned much that will be compiled, analyzed, and reported in future publications and conferences.[5] In many cases, we have raised as many new questions as we have answered. In short, change of this nature does not occur overnight nor with minimum commitment. We all have much still to learn from one another.

References

Bryk, A. S., Easton, J. Q., Kerbow, D., Rollow, S. G., & Sebring, P. A. (1994). The state of Chicago school reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(1), 74-78.

DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement.* Reston, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Elmore, R. F. (1996). Getting to scale with good educational practice. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*(1), 1-26.

Fullan, M. (1999). *Change forces: The sequel.* Philadelphia, PA: Falmer.

Hord, S. M. (1997). *Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Hord, S. M. (1999). Assessing a school staff as a community of professional learners. *Issues...About Change, 7*(1). Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Kruse, S., & Louis, K. S. (1995). Developing professional community in new and restructuring schools. In K. S. Louis, S. Kruse & Associates, *Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools* (pp. 187-207). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lee, V. E., Smith, J. B., & Croninger, R. G. (1995, Fall). *Another look at high school restructuring. Issues in Restructuring Schools.* Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

Lieberman, A. (Ed.). *The work of restructuring schools: Building from the ground up.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Louis, K. S., Toole, J., & Hargreaves, A. (2000). Rethinking school improvement. In J. Murphy & K. S. Louis (Eds.), *Handbook of research on educational administration* (2nd ed., pp. 251-276). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

McLaughlin, M. W. (1993). What matters most in teachers' workplace context? In J. W. Little & M. W. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Teachers' work: Individuals, colleagues, and contexts.* (pp. 79-103). New York: Teachers College Press.

Notes

[1]For more information about research that supports schools as professional learning communities, see Hord, 1997.

[2]An initiative developed in a past laboratory contract that focused on strategies principals used to influence change.

[3]"Scaling up" refers to the process of developing, incorporating, and extending new ideas about teaching and learning in more than a few schools.

[4]These readiness stages were largely determined by the extent to which the principal shared decision making among the whole staff and the degree to which a culture of continuous inquiry existed.

[5]Refer to SEDL website (http://www.sedl.org) forinformation on future publications and conferences related to the CCCII project.

Issues...about Change is published twice a year by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. This issue was written by D'Ette Cowan, Program Associate, and Melissa Capers, Consultant.

SEDL | OERI

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly, or in part, by the Office of Educational Research & Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract Number RJ96006801. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U. S. Government.

This publication may be reproduced and copies districtubed to others. Please acknowledge SEDL as the source in all copies.